

WORK ZONE

REDUCING MISHAPS BY 50%

Distracted Driving



Photo by Kristin Oguntinyinbo, UNC Highway Safety Research Center

Driving is a risky activity. Each year, more than 40,000 people are killed in motor-vehicle crashes, and over 3 million are injured. Driver inattention is a contributing factor in more than half of those crashes, including these two examples:

- A 22-year-old E-2 was typing a test message on his cell phone while driving, crossed a median, and hit a large tree head-on. Among his injuries were a broken right ankle, broken right femur, broken pelvis, broken left hip, and multiple lacerations to his face and spleen. He wasn't wearing a seat belt. At last report, he still was hospitalized, and no one knew how many lost workdays he would have.

- A 19-year-old E-4 was returning from a weekend camping trip when he reached for a CD case on the far side of his truck. He swerved off the road and wasn't able to regain control of his vehicle in the wet, grassy median. As a result, the

truck rolled several times. Because he was wearing a seat belt, his only injuries were a sore back and neck and scrapes on his hands and legs. The victim didn't have any lost workdays, but he spent 10 days on light duty.

The Problem

Driving instructors estimate that a driver makes 200 decisions for every mile of driving. If you're mentally solving business or family problems while driving, you're adding to the total cognitive workload. If you take your eyes off the road for three or four seconds at 55 mph, the car travels the length of a football field. Other factors, such as fatigue, weather and traffic conditions, can make distractions even more potent.

The Clues

How do you know when you are distracted? Consider how many of these things have happened to you:

- A passenger in your car screamed or gasped because of something you did or didn't do.
- You ran a stop sign or red light unintentionally.
- You swerved suddenly to avoid an animal, a car, or another highway hazard.
- You slammed on your brakes because you didn't see the car in front of you stop.
- You didn't remember driving from one place to another.
- You drifted in your lane or into another lane of traffic.

These events are clues that you're distracted while driving. The next time you decide to read a road map or a work report, referee an argument, or even engage in an intense conversation on a cell phone or with occupants in the car, ask yourself this question: Who's driving?

The Solution

Here are some suggestions to help you manage distractions safely:

- If the newspaper, business report, or day planner is too great a temptation, stick it in the trunk of the car until you arrive at your destination.
- Secure everyone and everything that could be a distraction.
- Don't wait until you're driving to plan your route or to attend to personal grooming; do that before you go. Leave a little earlier—you'll be less stressed.
- Pre-set the climate control, radio, CD player, and any other device you may use.
- Postpone complex or emotional conversations on a cell phone or with passengers until you arrive at your destination.
- When you're hungry or thirsty, take a break.

The next time you catch yourself slamming on the brakes to avoid hitting something or someone, you know what to do. Recognize that you may be driving distracted. Use some common sense and help keep our roads safer for everyone.

Resources

- Wireless Phones and Driving (www.safetycenter.navy.mil/safetips/wireless.htm)
- Defensive Driving (www.safetycenter.navy.mil/defensivedriving.htm)
- Distracted Driving (www.safetycenter.navy.mil/media/ashore/issues/summer02/



distracted.htm; also www.safetycenter.navy.mil/media/groundwarrior/issues/summer01/distracted.htm)

- National Safety Council (www.nsc.org/nsm/drive2003.cfm)
- AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety (www.aaafoundation.org/multimediaindex.cfm?button=disdrv)
- AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety (www.aaafoundation.org/multimedia/index.cfm?button=distractII)
- National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/departments/nrd-13/DriverDistraction.html)

